# ON FILM

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## *KENNETH ANGER INTERVIEW*

## *THE CINEMA OF MARGUERITE DURAS*

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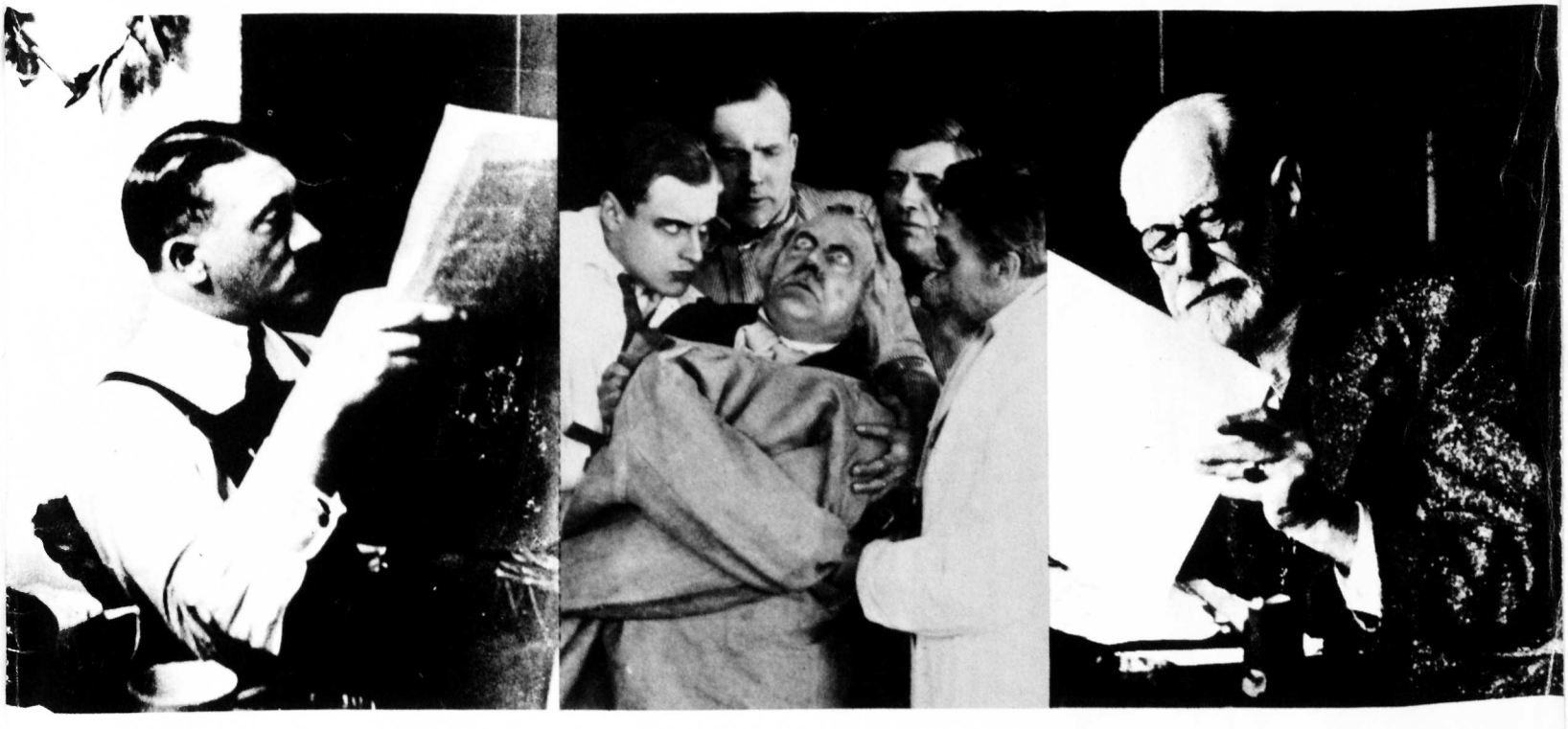


*$2.50*

# INTERVIEW

It was not with overwhelming enthusiasm that we decided to print the following interview with Kenneth Anger. Aside from some extreme objections by members of the editorial staff to Anger's apparent cynicism and misanthropy, the assumption that anything a director of distinction, no matter how rarely he surfaces, has to say about filmmaking is intrinsically valuable was questioned. We generally do not subscribe to the belief that autobiographical information offered by a director can contribute to the demystification of his work (indeed Anger it seems would prefer to contribute to the mystification which is a conspicuous characteristic of his films), or even that a filmmaker is the best authority on his own work.

The purpose of this introduction, however, is not to discredit the interview form or attempt to establish a new set of criteria by which to determine the validity of interviews in general. It is valid enough that interviews are widely read, even by the most conscientious opponents of "the cult of the individual", and that they consequently constitute a channel of cinematic discourse, primarily as a form of publicity. One can at least attempt to react to the status accorded a Spielberg by presenting, and thus legitimating those filmmakers whose work we advocate but whose voice is suppressed by the authority of the popular press. Even if we do not find this interview unusually enlightening or advocate Kenneth Anger's personal or political opinions, we do affirm his continuing status as filmmaker and as representative of an alternative, although often anti-social cinema by including an interview with him in this issue. Offensiveness and mystification can be a significant means of counteracting dominant, but accepted forms of offensiveness and mystification which pass unrecognized as such.

# PROFILE OF KENNETH ANGER ✓

## Jack English

Jack English: It is true that you once said that the only reason you made films was in order to meet people?

*Kenneth Anger: I did say something like that in past interviews. Every interview I give auto-destructs that one that I have given. And what I say applies to the mood of my moment. It doesn't even apply to the week next week. Like if I'd had a bad experience in France I may say, like William Randolph Hearst said, "I hate France because they'd scorched my shirts in the laundry," or something like that and he didn't make a film in France because of a silly incident similar to that and he went on to say "they should cut off all their money from the war loan." He also wrote vicious editorials against them. He was treating them as if they were the Germans in the last war.*

JE: Is that true? Or did he just say that at an interview?

*KA: I believe it's true. It's incredible. All of us are really shits.*

JE: It is a pity you haven't answered yes to my original question because I could have followed with who have you met through filmmaking.



Kenneth Anger in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

*KA: I never said it. I never said it was to meet people. I said it was just to seduce people. In other words I was making fun of the Hollywood producers who consider the casting couch the most important part of the business for them. And, if some beautiful young lady wants to become a movie star she first has to go on the casting couch. And that's the way Hollywood was put together. Except after they've broken in (I'm talking about beginners), or they've broken through, then they get some agent who doesn't let that thing happen any more, you see. But on the way, they usually have to put out in one way or the other. It's the rare one that doesn't, but there are some exceptions.*

JE: Do you set out to subvert the audience? That is, do your films work on people in ways that they might not be aware of?

*KA: Well "subvert" is the wrong word. Subvert is like I'm trying to do something dirty to them. I'm not trying to do anything dirty to them. I'm trying to open their minds. I use techniques that they've never heard of. They couldn't be aware of them because I use color combinations and rhythms, and things like that affect an audience like a tom-tom in an African drum ceremony. And they can't possibly be aware of it because they're ignorant of it.*

JE: Wouldn't I now be aware of it next time I went to see one of your films?

*KA: No, not necessarily. I still haven't told you anything.*

JE: If someone took and copied one of your ideas, would you be annoyed or flattered?

*KA: Well what sort of twit do you think I am? Of course I would; more than that, I'd put a curse on them.*

JE: I suppose someone in a strong position could say I'm flattered by imitation.

*KA: But I've been ripped off. I have been ripped off by everybody from Martin Scorcese to Ken Russell rather nakedly. In fact Martin Scorcese is the only one who considered giving me a half-hearted apology about it. Like, he said he's using pop music for films like* Mean Streets *and so forth, which was derived from my film,* Scorpio Rising. *Dennis Hopper ripped me off and so has Ken Russell. He uses volcanoes and things like that in* Altered States, *which he got from* Lucifer Rising. *I know he rented* Lucifer Rising *because I've seen the rental receipt. I think that's shitty.*

JE: Have you ever used subliminal editing and do you approve of the use of it?

*KA: I can't because the technology isn't there. "Subliminal" means quicker than the eye can see. There is nothing in ordinary film projection that is quicker than the eye because the shortest unit of film-time with ordinary projectors is one twenty-fourth of a second. That's one frame. There are twenty-four of those little pictures to one second. Well, a twenty-fourth, even one frame is a long time for the mind. The brain can register up to one two-hundredth of a second. During the war, World War II, in the RAF, they were flashing silhouettes of the German planes, testing RAF pilots to see how quickly they could recognise the silhouette of a Stuka or a similar German plane. These flashes were coming in at one two-hundredths of a second, not one twenty-fourth of a second - that's slow. That's almost like picking your eyes. When you blink, your eyes open to check, you see quite clearly; you register quite a loss if your brain is normal. It is your brain picking up on all of that. And it's been proved that just the briefest glimpse registers in the mind.*

* * *

*In the ruins of Karnac I could walk around and find doors and things like that I knew would be there. I knew where things were because I could remember - I think. Otherwise it was just really bizarre. For people were with me. So how come you're the guy here who knows who everyone and where everything is? I say I* don't *know; I just seem to remember.*

JE: At what age did you become interested in black magic, and was it through an experience?

*KA: When I was six years old I used to be visited in my bedroom every night by a ghost - and it was my friend. I wasn't afraid of it. I lived in the attic of our house on the top floor. They had turned it into a boy's room, mainly to get me and my toys out of the way. If I had lived downstairs, I would have had to take my toy train tracks up and they wouldn't have let me keep them - you know - train tracks and everything. And there was this ghost living in that attic and I could actually see it. I was like a friend. It would come and stand, just like my friend, and would come and play with me. It would sit on the bed, just like an imp. It looked like one of those imps that sit on toadstools and are made out of plaster, a garden imp. It was a little old man; it was a little old creature; white beard, green cap; it looked exactly like a garden imp. Then I had a troll that lived in my fishpool. We had a fishpool, a large ornamental pool full of goldfish, and there was a tiny little bridge. This was my grandmother's house in California and the troll told me "come in, come in," and I jumped in the fishpool. It's amazing I didn't drown - I couldn't swim.*

* * *

JE: How do you regard the structural film school of filmmakers: Michael Snow, Peter Gidal?

*KA: The names are enough to put me off. I don't go out of my way to bore myself and I'm perfectly happy to have every conceivable prejudice because I literally don't care what anybody else thinks of me and I never have. Your question is like "Do I read* Life *magazine?" I do not read* Life *magazine because it's trash in my opinion. In other words, I don't care if I offend Michael Snow. Who cares? I have nothing to do with these people. I've heard the term structuralist and I find the whole idea pretentious and empty.*

JE: Before the conversation I called you a film director, which annoyed you. Why?

*KA: An idea in the public's mind of a film director conjures up pictures of people being chauffeured around in limousines. I'm not working in commercial films. I don't have anything to do with that world. I'd like to be approximately as comfortable as George Kuchar. He's had a mansion since the 30's and just the ground it stands on is worth a couple of million.*

JE: Do you see films being an illusionist medium?

*KA: Well it isn't a total illusion. It's a trick. You're watching twenty-four still pictures a second and it fools you into thinking it's moving. It's not moving; you are watching a series of still pictures, each one in a slightly different position. The whole thing is based on trickery: "movies". And I prefer the word "movies" to "film". "Movies" is a slang expression invented in 1912 by the people that watched them. I don't like the word "film" because it's cold and pretentious.*

JE: Do you see holography as the next logical step in film technology?

*KA: Nothing is logical in the world. Holographs are the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. They're like they're made out of jello. They're not real. There's nothing you can caress. After I look at these hideous imitations of dimensionality I am very happy to go back to reality. It's like after watching ten minutes of a 3D film I say, "what is this bullshit?" The technology is not perfected. The idea that things are getting better and better is wrong; they're getting worse and worse.*

JE: Would you like to be popular, or are you content to be esoteric?

*KA: People can be esoteric and popular. Gurdjieff was both esoteric and he had thousands of followers and I can think of many others. If the only way I can be popular is by pleasing the public, and that's not going to happen, then forget it. My opinion of the masses' tastes either in America, Europe, or Russia is the pits.*

JE: Could you define that in movie terms?

*KA: Movies that have been successful these last few years that are garbage. I wouldn't know where to start. They are endless. All the big moneymakers, including* Apocalypse Now. *The only big commercial film I like in recent years were a few scenes within* Close Encounters *only because they happened to be beautifully conceived shots. It's incomprehensible to me that* Stars Wars *was a hit.*

JE: Which contemporary filmmakers do you respect?

*KA: None.*

JE: How do you respect rock music?

*KA: "Respect" is a word I'd never use. It's not in my vocabulary. Either I like something or I hate it. I like some rock music but so much of it is garbage these days. As I've stated earlier, the idea of stringing together pop singles for a soundtrack was mine. It's an easy way of making a soundtrack. Instead of hiring a bunch of musicians you just buy some little singles and string them together and call it a soundtrack. I was happy with the syncopation between a Pierrot in my film,* Rabbit's Moon, *and the soundtrack. I made people look like they were animated toys.*

JE: What is your opinion of Godard?

*KA: He made the stupidest statement ever made about movies. He said films are truth twenty-four frames a second, and that's a total lie. On no level are they truths. If they depict something that is supposed to be true it is still a trick.*

JE: Do you see yourself as being placed in some sort of tradition or being placed in film history?

*KA: I told you already I don't care what people think about me. That goes for film critics or the film public. I don't care about film history either. It is the most inaccurate form of writing that has come along. Film history is based on copying somebody else's mistakes. People don't do original research and they repeat the same mistakes again.*

JE: Why did you chose Jimmy Page to write a soundtrack?

*KA: Because he collectes Aleister Crowley and so do I. My latest film,* Lucifer Rising *- the philosophy behind it is Aleister Crowley and the fact that Jimmy Page collects Crowley I thought would make him sympathetic towards it and the fact that he has his own recording studio in his house together with the fact that he is a good musician I thought would add up to a good soundtrack, but it didn't. It only added up to twenty-five minutes of soundtrack.*

JE: Why was *Lucifer Rising* ten years in the making?

*KA: Because I refused to give up. No bank would front me the money because I'm not bankable. Bankable means someone who shows a profit. Banks don't give a damn about the film. All they care about is making a profit. They would front the money for* The French Connection II, *which lost money; the banks are so stupid they think that because one thing made money the sequels will too. No bank would lend me money. Besides, ten years isn't a long time to me. Not to make a work of art. Some pyramids took twenty-five years to build. Cathedrals in Europe took hundreds. It's the most expensive so-called "underground" film that's ever been made.*

JE: Why did you cast Marianne Faithful?

*KA: I type-cast. Marianne Faithful plays a destructive female and she was. She's playing herself. She plays Lillith, the demon of destruction in female form.*

JE: Do you see films as being a mirror of life?

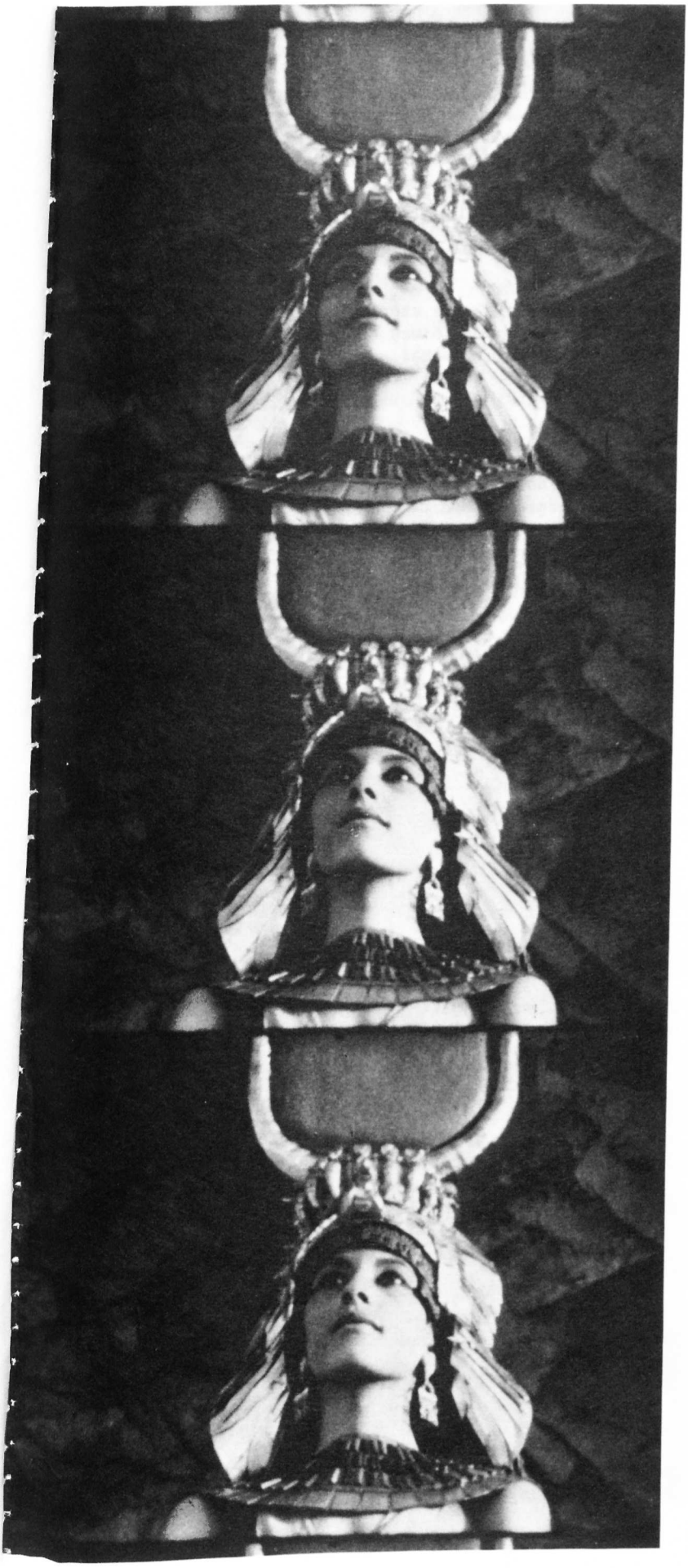
*KA: They can be. They can be anything. Films are like notepaper. There's nothing sacred about them. They are like a printing press or notepaper. They can be propaganda, pornography, spiritual.*

JE: Changing the subject slightly, what do you think about the growing epidemic of heroin use, and abuse, among the young in London, Paris, Amsterdam, New York and Milan.

*KA: It's disgusting. Here in New York too there is a whole new wave, and the Ayatollah is destroying America by organizing the importation of tons of heroin from Iran. They should have the death penalty for people that push it to children. You can buy it on any street corner in New York. Communists are behind it. Red China is trying to destroy the West by weakening it. It is a whole secret play so that we will be a pushover. We've still got the H bombs - now we have a president who doesn't mind using them. We had a stupid country hick, now we have a Hollywood hick.*

JE: What do you remember about *Who Has Been Rocking My Dreamboat?*

*KA: It was my first picture. I made it in 1941. I was eleven and the music was the Mills Brothers' song "Who Has been Rocking my Dreamboat" which came out just before war was declared. So it's associated with that period. It was the popular song of summer, 1941.*



JE: Could you tell me about Michael Kooper, the cameraman on *Lucifer Rising*?

*KA: He committed suicide - because I balled him out too often. Michael Kooper photographed the* Sgt. Pepper *album cover. I was responsible for his suicide. He was already depressed and very thin-skinned. I balled him out and he went and took some pills. He was a very talented and skilled photographer. He took the still on which the painting "Swinging London" was copied from: Mick Jagger handcuffed to Robert Fraser.*

JE: To some people your film work often seems violent. Do you see a point where the artifice of violence in art ceases to be art and becomes cruelty; performances where persons involved, amongst other things, commit self-mutilation?

*KA: I consider such acts completely sick. Sheer pathology that should be stopped, if need be by force. Cruelty to an animal or another person is absurd. I can cope with may things, but not that. A lot of things pass for art because the times we live in are so morally chaotic.*

JE: Were you disappointed with the general reaction to *Scorpio Rising*?

*KA: The general public never saw it when it first screened. It's never gone into big commercial cinemas, it's only shown in "art houses". I made it quickly and it's not my favorite film. It's the least important of my films. Many lawsuits were filed against. Some, I suppose, because of male nudity. One lawsuit was from the American Nazi Party claiming I had desecrated the Swastika.*

JE: Did you ever want to act?

*KA: No, never, although through my grandmother, a Hollywood costume designer, I got a small part after being auditioned by Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt came and watched me in my dancing class. He liked what he saw. I got the part. The part required no speaking - only movement.*

JE: What do your parents do?

*KA: They're dead. My father was Chief Engineer at Douglas Aircraft in the electronics department. He was one of the fifteen founders of Douglas Aircraft, which is now McDonnell-Douglas. My parents were Presbyterians, non-smokers and teetotalers. My upbringing, to say the least, was strict.*

JE: Do you watch or enjoy television?

*KA: I hate it; I'm allergic to it.*

JE: I recently saw *Limelight* on Italian television.

*KA:* Limelight *I call "Slimelight" because it's so fucking sentimental. I hate sentimentality. I liked* Monsieur Verdoux *because it was full of good black humor.*

JE: Do you think John Lennon's statement about the so-called "swinging sixties" era, that it was a lot of middle-class kids growing their hair long, is a fair appraisal of that time?

*KA: I think it's a good thing to say - that a few middle-class kids, or spoiled brats as I call them, were just burning the candle at both ends. Everybody was tripping out with LSD, a new drug then. Some graduated to other things, like smack for example.*

JE: Do you have any future projects planned? Tell me about your new book.

*KA: A sequel to* Hollywood Babylon *called* Son of Hollywood Babylon. *The first chapter is "I Was Raped by Mickey Rooney".*

JE: Is that true?

*KA: Of course it's true, otherwise I wouldn't say it. He was fourteen and I was six. I had to drop another chapter devoted to Joan Crawford, about her mistreatment of her children. Joan Crawford was still alive and heard about it. She said she'd sue me, so it had to be dropped by my publisher. Now that she's dead I'll probably include it in* Son of Hollywood Babylon. *The chapter included Joan Crawford making her daughter lick out the toilet bowl - very sick things. She was mad - totally mad. The daughter in revenge wrote a bestseller called* Mommy Dearest. *I'm pleased, although I wrote about them two years before. I'm pleased because can you imagine Joan Crawford died a millionairess, and didn't leave a penny to either the adopted son or daughter. They hate her guts with good reason.*

JE: What is your opinion of Andy Warhol's book?

*KA: I refuse to discuss Andy Warhol under any circumstances.*

JE: You dislike Bianca Jagger too, don't you?

*KA: Not as much as I dislike Andy Warhol. She was a child hooker in Paris at 11 or 12 years. At 13 she was the mistress of Eddie Barclay, Barclay Records, and she moved on from there. She pretends to be Nicaraguan. She's a total fake, although quite a good one. I was invited by Mick to the wedding and I said thanks, but no thanks - I'll come to the divorce.*

JE: Do you like Pasolini's films?

*KA: I think* Salo *was quite interesting. I liked several of his other films. Rather uneven though there are some I don't like at all. Since he's dead, there's no one alive I'm even faintly interested in. Frankly I don't have enough time nor money to bother looking at their pictures. There's nothing that would persuade me to look at them. I'm too involved in my own films to look at other peoples' films, but I was very interested in Pasolini's films and I thought* Salo *was pretty ballsy.*

JE: Do you have any interest in any political group or party?

*KA: I'm an anarchist. I don't believe in political systems.*

JE: I briefly worked with Malcolm McClaren in the U.K. last year, who supports the same view.

*KA: Malcolm McClaren's not an anarchist. He's a capitalist. He's on a money-making trip for whatever reason and to me that's not really the essence of anarchism. I think capitalism is very seductive and has many ways of seducing people. People start justifying themselves and their activities in money-making areas but when large amounts of money become available to them they end up being part of a capitalist system and rather than subverting any part of capitalism, capitalism has subverted them. It's a flip-flop. I have seen this happen more than once. I'm speaking about some music groups, like The Grateful Dead for example, who in their early career were quite anarchistic, but later became quite tame. The Rolling Stones were the same. When you become that rich you cannot escape being part of a capitalist system. I imagine The Rolling Stones to be listed on the English Stock Market. Unfortunately you can't be an enormous success and at the same time be bitching about capitalism. Excuse me if I have a certain cynicism, but I consider it a pose - to be very rich and bitch about capitalism.*

JE: Have you ever received a grant from any government agency?

*KA: Yes. I got an American grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. A small grant that just helped to pay off a few small debts. I also got financial assistance in England for* Lucifer Rising, *but I have so many debts it will be years before I make a profit on that film. I also got an Arts Grant from New York State, and from the Ford Foundation. They gave me $10,000, which is not all that much money - a drop in the bucket to them. Ten million wouldn't make a blip on their computer.*

JE: Aren't you presently involved with the New York Film Co-op?

*KA: The Filmmakers' Co-op distributes my films; the name is "The Filmmakers' Co-op". It's a communal thing within which we get approximately fifty percent or higher. The filmmakers run it themselves and we get a higher cut than if it were run by a commercial company. There are other co-ops: London, Holland, Italy. There are co-ops all over the world based on our model.*

JE: Could you tell me the reasons for your full page ad in *The Village Voice* in 1967 renouncing filmmaking?

*KA: My abandoning filmmaking was through Bobby Beausoleil, who had been my original Lucifer. After a quarrel, he broke into my studio and stole all the film and took it down to Southern California and gave it to Charles Manson. I was devastated, as I'd worked so hard on the film. Manson sent up an emissary saying you can have the film back for $10,000. My reply was that I don't have the money and if I did have the money I wouldn't accept blackmail. If I could have afforded the money I still wouldn't have paid Manson. This was the first example of holding a stolen film for ransom ever in film history. Some years after this happened, a similar demand was made to Pasolini for the return of* Salo.

JE: Have you ever considered Super 8 film?

*KA: No. I don't want to work on 16mm either. If I had a choice I'd use 70mm, then I could do all kinds of special effects and hand tinting. I work on 16mm because I can't afford 35mm or 70mm.*

JE: I'm amazed you can't get backing to finish *Lucifer Rising*, or transfer it to 35mm.

*KA: Well, you can be amazed. Money's very tight, and I'm not commercial. In other words, people like Francis Coppola know I need the money; Paul Getty knows I need the money. They're millionaires. They won't give it to me. The rich people I know are bastards. Mick Jagger's a fucking bastard. He's mean; he said "Oh Kenneth, you'll never finish it with any help from me." Well I have finished it. Part of the reason was to defy him. He's over the hill; his little act is over the hill.*

New York, January 28, 1981